22

ESTONIA

Piret Ehin

Figure 22.1  Map of Estonia
The Republic of Estonia (Eesti Vabariik) is located in northern Europe, on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea. Stretching 350 kilometres from east to west and 240 kilometres from north to south, the country has land borders with Latvia to the south, with Russia to the east, and a maritime border with Finland to the north. Estonia has nearly 3,800 kilometres of coastline, and over 1,500 islands and islets in the Baltic Sea.

Whilst the size of its territory is roughly comparable to that of the Netherlands or Denmark, the forested, sparsely inhabited country has a population of approximately 1,315,819 and a population density of 30.3 people per square kilometre. Almost 70 per cent of the inhabitants are urban dwellers, with a third of the population residing in the capital city, Tallinn.

The Estonians speak a Finno–Ugric language closely related to Finnish. Their ancestors settled in the territory over 5,000 years ago. The local tribes remained self-governing until Danish and German crusaders conquered Estonia in the thirteenth century. Between 1558 and 1583, during

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**Table 22.1 Estonia profile**

| EU entry year | 2004 |
| Schengen entry year | 2007 |
| MEPs elected in 2009 | 6 |
| MEPs under Lisbon Treaty | 6 |
| Capital | Tallinn |
| Total area* | 45,227 km² |
| Population | 1,315,819 |
| 68.7% Estonians; 25.6% Russians; 2.1%; Ukrainians; 1.2% Belarusians; 0.8% Finns; 1.6 % others |
| Population density** | 30.3/km² |
| Median age of population | 41.3 |
| Political system | Parliamentary republic |
| Head of state | Toomas Hendrik Ilves, Social Democratic Party (SDE) (October 2006—) |
| Prime minister | Andrus Ansip, Reform Party (ER) (April 2005–March 2014); Taavi Rõivas, Reform Party (ER) (March 2014—) |
| Currency | Previously Estonian kroon, Euro (€) since January 2011 |
| Prohead GDP in PPS | 14,800 € |


**Notes:

* Total area including inland waters.

** Population density: the ratio of the annual average population of a region to the land area of the region.

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**1 Geographical position**

The Republic of Estonia (Eesti Vabariik) is located in northern Europe, on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea. Stretching 350 kilometres from east to west and 240 kilometres from north to south, the country has land borders with Latvia to the south, with Russia to the east, and a maritime border with Finland to the north. Estonia has nearly 3,800 kilometres of coastline, and over 1,500 islands and islets in the Baltic Sea.

Whilst the size of its territory is roughly comparable to that of the Netherlands or Denmark, the forested, sparsely inhabited country has a population of approximately 1,315,819 and a population density of 30.3 people per square kilometre. Almost 70 per cent of the inhabitants are urban dwellers, with a third of the population residing in the capital city, Tallinn.

**2 Historical background**

The Estonians speak a Finno–Ugric language closely related to Finnish. Their ancestors settled in the territory over 5,000 years ago. The local tribes remained self-governing until Danish and German crusaders conquered Estonia in the thirteenth century. Between 1558 and 1583, during
Estonia

the Livonian War, Russia, the Scandinavian powers, and the Union of Lithuania and Poland fought
to control present-day Estonia and Latvia. Following the conflict, Estonia entered a period of rela-
tive peace and prosperity under Swedish rule. After the Great Northern War which lasted between
1700 and 1721, Estonia was incorporated into the Russian Empire. However, the Baltic-German
landowning elites retained their privileges, and Lutheranism remained the dominant religion. The
late nineteenth century was the period of national awakening. Amidst the chaos that followed the
Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, Estonia declared independence on 24 February 1918 and secured
it by defeating both the Red Army as well as Baltic-German reactionaries in the 1918–1920 War
of Independence. The two decades of independence were marked by rapid economic and cultural
development. The fledgling democracy, however, succumbed to authoritarian rule in the 1930s.

The Molotov–Ribbenentrop Pact negotiated between the USSR and Nazi Germany in 1939
assigned Estonia to the Soviet sphere of influence. Estonia was incorporated into the USSR in
1940, an act never recognized de jure by the majority of Western democracies. Nazi Germany
invaded in 1941; Soviet rule was re-established in 1944. Tens of thousands of Estonians were
executed or deported by Soviet authorities; about 70,000 fled to the West. Agriculture was
collectivized, and mass immigration from various regions of the USSR dramatically altered the
ethnic composition of the country. Between 1939 and 1989 the percentage of ethnic Estonians
in the country’s total population fell from about 90 to 62 per cent.

In the late 1980s, Estonians demanded independence in a series of mass protests known as the
‘Singing Revolution’. Independence was restored in 1991, and the last Russian troops left
Estonia in 1994. Estonia’s swift political transformation and rapid economic development since
the early 1990s have earned it a reputation as a transition success story.

3 Geopolitical profile

Within the two decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Estonia’s position in Europe has
changed radically. In 1991, Estonia emerged from behind the Iron Curtain as a poor, peripheral,
and obscure ex-Soviet republic. By 2011, Estonia had become one of the most integrated
countries in northern Europe in terms of membership in major international institutions and
agreements. A member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)
since 1991 and of the European Union and NATO since 2004, Estonia acceded to the Schengen
area in 2007 and to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)
in 2010. Having fulfilled the Maastricht convergence criteria amidst the global economic crisis,
Estonia became the seventeenth member of the euro-zone on 1 January 2011.

Estonia’s dedication in pursuing maximum integration with Western institutions reflects the
small nation’s quest to strengthen statehood in a complex international environment. The coun-
try’s relations with its large neighbour, the Russian Federation, remain complicated. Moscow
continues to claim that the Baltic states joined the USSR voluntarily, whilst the three Baltic states
regard the half-century of Soviet rule as a period of illegal occupation. A range of contentious
issues dominated the agenda of Estonian–Russian relations throughout the 1990s, including the
interpretation of history, the status of the Russophone population, the question of Russian troop
withdrawal, Estonia’s aspirations to EU and NATO membership, trade and transit issues, the de-
nition of borders, and the status of the Russian Orthodox Church. Whilst many policy issues have
been solved, conflicts over history, identity, and political memory still loom large (Berg and Ehin,
2009). In spring 2007, the decision by the Estonian government to relocate a monument known
as the Bronze Soldier dedicated to the Soviet ‘liberators’ of Estonia from downtown Tallinn to a
military cemetery led to massive riots, mostly by Russian-speaking youth, in the Estonian capi-
tal. Tensions escalated into a major crisis in Russian–Estonian relations, involving a siege of the
Estonian embassy in Moscow, cyber attacks on Estonia’s IT infrastructure, and the redirection of Russian transit shipments.

Estonia, like its Baltic neighbours, remains a vocal critic of the authoritarian regime in the Kremlin. To Moscow’s irritation, the three Baltic states play an active role in the EU-Russia ‘shared neighbourhood’, supporting democratic reforms in the post-Soviet space, and backing the EU and NATO aspirations of countries such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova.

4 Overview of the political landscape

Today’s Republic of Estonia conceptualizes itself as a restored state and claims legal continuity from the Republic of Estonia that was founded in 1918 and was illegally annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940. The principle of legal continuity has far-reaching implications for legislation and policy. Notably, Estonian citizenship was automatically granted only to those who had been citizens before Soviet annexation, and to their descendants. Those who had settled in Estonia during the Soviet period, about a third of the population, could obtain citizenship by naturalization. Alternatively, they had the right to register themselves as citizens of Russia, the USSR’s successor state, or to choose any other citizenship. As of 1 December 2011, 84.3 per cent of Estonia’s population held Estonian citizenship, 8.8 per cent were citizens of other countries, mostly Russia, and 6.9 per cent were stateless (Ministry of Interior, 2011). The latter category consists of former Soviet citizens who have not become citizens of any country.

Under the constitution adopted in 1992, Estonia has a parliamentary system of government, with a Prime Minister as chief executive. The President, whose role is largely ceremonial, is elected by the 101-member unicameral parliament of Estonia (Riigikogu), with two-thirds of the votes required. If the candidate does not gain the amount of votes required, the right to elect the President goes over to a special electoral assembly. The Supreme Court is the highest court in the state, exercising constitutional review and reviewing appeals.

Whilst governments used to be short-lived in the 1990s, Estonian politics has become increasingly stable since the turn of the millennium. Centre-right parties have dominated the government since 2002. Andrus Ansip (Reform Party) is one of the longest-serving Prime Ministers in the EU. In office since 2005, he was re-elected for a third term in March 2011.

5 Brief account of the political parties

Estonia has a multiparty system in which coalition governments are the norm. The origins of the Estonian party system lie in the independence movements of the late 1980s. The Eesti Rahvusliku Sõltumatuse Partei, ERSP (Estonian National Independence Party), established in 1988 by leading dissidents, was the first opposition party in the entire Soviet Union. Another major political force of the era, Rahvarinne (the Popular Front), which played an important role in bringing down the Communist regime, fell apart soon after the restoration of independence, giving rise to a number of new political parties.

Overall, the Estonian party system has displayed many features typical of young post-Communist democracies; instability, mergers and splintering are common, and several elections have seen the success of newly founded parties, high electoral volatility, the prevalence of fuzzily focussed parties without a strong social base or civil society roots, the fragmentation of vote and seat distribution, and low levels of popular trust in parties (Rose and Munro, 2009). At the same time, there is a significant degree of continuity in the Estonian party system: all major parties currently represented in the Riigikogu, or their direct predecessors, have been present in politics since 1992 (Sikk, 2006, 343).
Estonia

The Estonian political landscape has been dominated by centre-right actors and views. No major political actors clearly identify as ‘left’ and there is no real Communist successor party to speak of; the Estonian Left Party won 0.1 per cent of the vote in the 2007 general elections. Another notable feature of the Estonian party system is the absence of any significant ethnic parties, despite the fact that nearly a third of the country’s population is Russian-speaking and the ethnic cleavage is strongly politicized. Whilst parties claiming to represent Estonia’s Russian-speaking minority exist, they are marginal and have not been represented in the Riigikogu since 2003. Finally, the Estonian party system is characterized by a close relationship between parties and the state. Cartelization is evident from the institutional rules favouring established parties, patterns of party financing, an advanced system of regulation, and a ‘substantial circulation of people between administrative and political echelons’ (ibid., 341).

The number of parties represented in the Riigikogu has decreased significantly over time. Whilst nine parties or electoral alliances won enough votes to secure at least one seat in 1992, the number of parliamentary parties was reduced to six by the results of 2007 elections and to four following the 2011 vote. Table 22.2 provides an overview of the main political parties in Estonia.

The pro-market Reformierakond (Reform Party) has been in government continuously since 1999, usually as the leading coalition partner. The centrist Keskerakond (Centre Party), led by the charismatic and controversial Edgar Savisaar, has been a major force in Estonian politics since 1991. It has acquired the status of the main opposition party; whilst winning the largest share of the vote in the general elections of 2003, and placing second in both 2007 and 2011, it has been repeatedly sidelined in the process of government formation by right-wing parties. The party has been remarkably successful in appealing to Russian-speaking voters, effectively putting ethnic Russian parties out of business.

Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit, IRL (Pro Patria and Res Publica Union) was founded in 2006 when two Conservative parties merged. The first of these, Isamaalit (Pro Patria Union) was the successor of Isamaa (Pro Patria), the party both credited and blamed for the radical reforms implemented by the Mart Laar government in the early 1990s, and the ERSP. The second of these, Res Publica, was created 15 months before the general elections of March 2003. Promising ‘new politics’ to an electorate increasingly frustrated with the self-serving ways of politicians, it took a quarter of the vote in these elections and was the leading partner in the governing coali-
tion that lasted until 2005.

The moderately left-Liberal Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond, SDE (Social Democratic Party) has never enjoyed the prominence that Social Democrats have experienced in the neighbouring

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**Table 22.2** List of political parties in Estonia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original name</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eesti Reformierakond</td>
<td>ER</td>
<td>Reform Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eesti Keskerakond</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>Centre Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit</td>
<td>IRL</td>
<td>Pro Patria and Res Publica Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sotsiaaldemokraatlik erakond</td>
<td>SDE</td>
<td>Social Democratic Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eestimaa Eestimaa Rohelised</td>
<td>EER</td>
<td>Greens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eestimaa Rahvaliti</td>
<td>ERL</td>
<td>People’s Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eestimaa Eesti Kristlikud Demokraaaid</td>
<td></td>
<td>Christian Democratic Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vene Eestimaa Eesti</td>
<td></td>
<td>Russian Party in Estonia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Põllumaste kogu</td>
<td></td>
<td>Farmers’ Assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eestimaa Ühendatud Vasakpartei</td>
<td></td>
<td>United Left Party of Estonia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libertas Eesti</td>
<td></td>
<td>Libertas Estonia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scandinavian countries. It has significant coalition potential, however, as parties on both the right and left of the Estonian political spectrum regard the SDE as a suitable partner.

_Erakond Eestimaa Rohelised_ (the Estonian Green Party) was a newcomer in the 2007 elections. Although the party was founded only in 2006, it can be considered a successor of the Green movement dating back to the late 1980s. Finally, _Rahvaliit_ (the People’s Union) has strong backing in rural areas. Its popularity has shrunk due to corruption scandals involving the party’s leaders. Both the Greens and the People’s Union failed to win seats in the 2011 Riigikogu elections.

### 5.1 Party attitudes towards the European Union

The EU integration issue has been part of a complex dynamic between the Estonian political elite and the public. Given a very strong domestic consensus on the strategic aims of democracy and a market economy, integration with the EU was largely congruent with the Estonian elite’s state-building and transition strategies. In the pre-accession period, all major parties supported the objective of joining the EU.

However, dwindling levels of public support for the EU in the years just prior to accession led several parties and politicians to reconsider their strategies (Mikkel and Kasekamp, 2008). The Centre Party, the main opposition force, was torn between the conflicting incentives of seeing the accession process to a successful end and capitalizing on popular EU hesitations by criticizing the government’s ‘integration at any cost’ approach. Intra-party tensions were clearly evident at the party’s congress, held in August 2003, where a plurality of members voted against EU accession. Differences over European integration led a group of prominent politicians to abandon the party in 2005.

A Eurosceptic mood was strongly present in the country’s first European Parliament elections, held in June 2004. Having secured a ‘Yes’ to accession in the referendum, political parties could safely afford to flirt with Euroscepticism in an attempt to boost their electoral appeal amongst certain segments of the electorate. All major parties, with the exception of the Social Democrats, engaged in significant EU-bashing in the 2004 election campaigns, posturing as defenders of national interests _vis-à-vis_ a large, dominating, alien, and bureaucratic European Union (Sikk, 2009; Tigasson, 2009). The governing Res Publica’s oversized campaign posters featured tough-looking candidates promising a ‘Breakthrough’. The Conservative Pro Patria Union campaigned under the slogan ‘For Estonia’. The rural People’s Union vowed to ‘Protect the Estonian Kroon’. The Reform Party promised to defend Estonia’s pro-market policies and institutions against European over-regulation. The Centre Party sent vague and mixed signals, trying to offer something for everyone. Only the Social Democrats openly supported the deepening of integration and their leading candidate, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, argued that strong supranational institutions are in the interest of small Member States such as Estonia.

The relatively strong presence of Eurosceptic forces in Estonian politics around the time of accession seems to have been a temporary phenomenon. Public support for the EU increased rapidly in the years following accession. In this context, political parties have had few incentives to politicize Estonia’s membership, and party-based Euroscepticism has once again been constrained to the fringes of the political spectrum. Amidst the economic crisis, there were virtually no attempts to scapegoat the EU for the difficulties. To the contrary, many agreed with Prime Minister Ansip that without the EU, Estonia would be worse off. Eurosceptic forces were barely visible in the European Parliament election of 2009.
6 Public opinion and the European Union

The attitudes of the Estonian public towards the EU have undergone dramatic changes over time. Roughly from 2001 to 2003, Estonia had some of the highest levels of public Euroscepticism amongst all candidate countries, as documented by Eurobarometer surveys. With the accession referendum on the horizon, the political elite feared that stubborn voters would undermine a decade of efforts by vetoing accession. The eventual referendum result was a relief: 67 per cent of those who turned out voted in favour of EU membership.

Whilst the precise reasons for Estonians’ cautious attitudes towards the EU in the immediate pre-accession phase remain subject to debate, existing studies suggest that the low levels of public support in the pre-accession period reflected dwindling trust in the national government, concerns about the effects of accession for Estonia’s sovereignty and culture, and a fear of price increases. Whilst the elites regarded rapid integration with the West as an unquestioned imperative ensuring ‘the irreversibility of Estonia’s independence’, segments of the population resented elite eagerness in bending to the demands of Brussels, and argued that Estonia was heading from one union (the USSR) into another (Pettai, 2005; Ehin, 2001 and 2002; Lust, 2006; Vetik et al., 2006).

Since Estonia became a full member of the EU, however, public support has steadily increased. Since 2007, it has been well above the EU average. According to Eurobarometer surveys conducted between 2008 and 2010, some 70–80 per cent of Estonians believe that the country has benefitted from EU membership. The increase in support coincided with an economic boom that the country experienced during the first four years of EU membership. However, the EU-optimism of Estonians cannot be attributed to economic factors alone, as is evident from support rates well above the EU average in 2009, when the country was engulfed in one of the deepest recessions in the entire EU. Some observers have linked increased support to the intensified perception of external threat in the wake of the Bronze Soldier crisis of spring 2007 and the Russian–Georgian War of August 2008.

7 National and EP electoral systems

The unicameral Riigikogu has 101 members, each elected for a four-year term. The electoral system used in Riigikogu elections is proportional representation, in which each voter votes for a single candidate on a party list and the vote is counted for both the individual and the party (Ishiyama, 1996). The country is divided into 12 multi-member electoral districts. There is a complex three-stage system for distributing mandates: personal mandate, electoral list mandate, and compensation mandate. Seats unallocated based on Hare quotas on the district level are distributed at the national level according to a modified d’Hondt formula amongst parties receiving at least 5 per cent of the nationwide vote.

Estonia has six seats in the European Parliament. The elections take place in one national electoral district according to the principle of proportional representation and mandates are distributed according to the d’Hondt method. There has been an extensive debate over the use of open-list or closed-list proportional representation in EP elections, resulting in a series of amendments to the Estonian EP Election Act. Whilst all previous elections in Estonia, including the 2004 EP elections, have been open-list, the 2009 election was closed-list. The change from open- to closed-lists was criticized for increasing the influence of party backroom politics, whilst depriving citizens of a real choice amongst candidates. The reform became a prominent campaign issue and had far-reaching consequences for the results of the 2009 EP elections, contributing, in particular, to the unprecedented success of independent candidate Indrek Tarand. Dissatisfied with the results of the closed-list experiment, the major parties reinstituted open-lists shortly after the 2009 elections.
Estonia is a pioneer in e-voting and is the only country in the EU to allow internet voting in EP elections. The sophisticated internet-based voting system in which voters use government-issued ID cards fitted with computer chips has been used in national, local, and European elections since 2005. In the 2011 parliamentary elections, over 15 per cent of all eligible voters voted over the internet. The respective figure for the 2009 EP election was 6.5 per cent (Estonian National Electoral Committee, 2011).

8 A glance at the EP and national elections

Turnout in Riigikogu elections was 58.2 per cent in 2003, 61.9 per cent in 2007, and 63.0 per cent in 2011. In contrast, only 26.8 per cent of eligible voters went to the polls to choose their representatives in the EP election in 2004, whilst 43.9 per cent did so in 2009.

Whilst governing centre-right parties dominate national elections, they fare poorly in EP elections. In 2004, only one of the three governing parties, the Reform Party, won a seat in the European Parliament. By contrast, opposition parties and small parties performed well by obtaining the remaining five seats, as evident from the Centre Party’s solid vote and the unprecedented success of the small Social Democratic Party.

Table 22.3 National election results in Estonia: 2007–2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Vote %</th>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ER</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRL</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDE</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDE</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ER</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 22.4 EP election results in Estonia: 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lists</th>
<th>Votes (%)</th>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eersti Keskerakond</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eersti Reformierakond</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erakond Isamaalit</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eestimaa Rahvaliit</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ühendus vabariigi Eest - Res Publica</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demokraadid - Eesti Demokraatlik Partei</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eesti Pensionaride Erakond</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eesti Setsiaaldemokraatlik Tööpartei</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vene Erakond Eestis</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Turnout 26.8%

A third notable difference between national and European elections lies in the voters’ proclivity to cast a personal vote in EP elections. In 2004, the top-ranked candidate in the list of the Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, former Foreign Minister and, since 2006 President of Estonia, won about one-third of all votes cast in the election.

9 The 2009 European election

9.1 Party lists and manifestos

One hundred and one individuals were registered as candidates for the 2009 EP contest. Eleven parties presented their electoral lists; six independent candidates also ran. The parties included the six parties represented in the national Parliament at the time. In addition, five lesser known extra-parliamentary groups contested the election. These included Vene Erakond Eestis (Russian Party in Estonia), Põllumeeste Kogu (Farmers’ Assembly), Eestimaa Ühendatud Vasakpartei (United Left Party of Estonia), Enakond Eesti Kristlikud Demokraadid (Christian Democratic Party), and Libertas Eesti (Libertas Estonia). The six parties sitting in the Riigikogu fielded twelve candidates each – the maximum number allowed under the Estonian EP Elections Act – whilst extra-parliamentary parties presented between two and six candidates each. Most major parties held internal elections to draw up their electoral lists, although central party organs also had considerable say over the composition of the list (Ehin, 2009).

The lists of major parties were led by well-known politicians, such as Kristiina Ojuland, the vice-speaker of the Riigikogu and former Foreign Minister (Reform Party); Edgar Savisaar, the mayor of Tallinn (Centre Party); Tunne Kelam, an experienced MP and MEP (Pro Patria and Res Publica Union); Ivari Padar, a former minister of finance and leader of the Social Democrats; and Marek Strandberg, leader of the Green Party. The People’s Union, in the process of reinventing itself following corruption scandals involving the party’s old cadre, had listed a less well-known young politician, Ando Liivat, as their number one. Due to the fragmentation of the Estonian party system and the small number of Estonian MEPs, only the Reform Party and the Centre Party could hope to have more than one candidate elected (Sikk, 2009, 3); for most parties, all hopes focussed on the top-ranked candidate and the role of the other candidates was largely limited to embellishing the list.

The use of closed-list proportional representation encouraged the practice of including ‘decoy ducks’ in party lists. These were candidates with high vote-collecting potential but highly questionable intentions to become members of the EP, if elected. Edgar Savisaar, the top candidate of the Centre Party, was widely regarded as having no intention to take up a seat in the EP, which he did eventually refuse to do. Foreign Minister Urmas Paet, number two in the Reform Party’s list, openly declared that he did not plan to go to Brussels but was just helping his party win votes. Whilst the enlisting of phantom candidates has been widely criticized as violating ethical standards and reducing the transparency of elections, decoy ducks continue to be routinely and unapologetically employed by the major Estonian parties in general, local, and European elections.

The independent candidates included Indrek Tarand, a former high-ranking civil servant and a popular television host; Martin Helme, an Estonian nationalist; Dimitri Klenski, a local Russian politician and an active critic of Estonia’s minority policies; Yuri Zhuravlyov, a Russian rights activist; and two candidates largely unknown to the general public, Märt Õigus and Taira Aasa.
9.2 Electoral campaign

The intensity of campaigns was low. The use of closed-list PR appears to have reduced individual candidates’ incentives to campaign, as only one or two top-ranked candidates in the party list stood a realistic chance of being elected. Campaigns were also rendered less visible by the ban on outdoor political advertising on streets, buildings, and public transportation during the active campaign period. The ban, enforced in 2005 with the objective of reducing campaign spending and forcing parties to focus more on ‘substance’, made the 2009 EP elections markedly different from the 2004 campaigns, which featured huge posters of the main candidates. Several candidates, including Tarand, successfully used internet-based communications such as blogging and YouTube to attract younger voters.

The campaign messages, to the extent that they had anything to do with the EU, were rather general. Almost no clearly identifiable focal points for political debate emerged. The campaign of the leading government party, the Reform Party, emphasized the party’s EU-related competence, featuring advice from the Vice President of the European Commission Siim Kallas, a former leader of the party, and from three former and present Foreign Ministers included in the party list. The party platform emphasized rapid accession to the euro, opposition to EU-wide taxation, energy security, and the need to develop a common policy towards Russia. Notably, however, promises focussing on purely domestic matters, such as the pledge to retain generous parental benefits despite the economic crisis, received more airtime and media space than the party’s visions of European integration.

The junior government partner, the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union, defended economic liberalism and fiscal conservatism, campaigning under the message ‘Right decisions at a difficult time’. The platform emphasized the need to develop the single market, to retain open markets despite the economic crisis, rapid accession to the euro-zone, and the imperative of strengthening EU security and energy policies.

The Centre Party, the main opposition party, campaigned under the slogan ‘Estonia needs change.’ The campaign blamed the government for the economic crisis and social problems, zooming in on the hardships brought by the budget cuts. The Social Democratic Party focussed primarily on employment and social protection in the context of the economic crisis.

Whilst few observers initially paid much attention to the independent candidates, public opinion polls started to predict a mandate for Indrek Tarand a month before the elections. Tarand presented himself as a civil society candidate fighting against partocracy, determined to improve the quality of politics, and offering voters the opportunity to protest against the closed-list electoral system associated with self-serving behaviour and deal-making by political elites. Tarand had no real EU-related programme and no clear ideological position. With very limited funding, the campaign relied heavily on volunteer help, and was marked by bold and occasionally scandalous confrontations with the major political parties.

Two other independent candidates represented more extremist positions, but failed to translate these into high-visibility campaigns. The campaign of the nationalist Martin Helme was distinguished by opposition to various evils starting with the Lisbon Treaty and ending with homosexuality, immigration, and the alleged Islamization of Europe. Dimitri Klenski, charged with organizing the mass riots in Tallinn in April 2007, but declared not guilty in January 2009, took a strong stance against the Estonian state, which he described as an ethnocracy that could only be curbed with the help of various European institutions.

One of the controversies that received extensive media coverage during the week before election day concerned the erection of 20 campaign tents in Tallinn and other major cities
by the Centre Party. The tents were equipped with computers and internet connections, and the party offered the opportunity to cast votes electronically during the period of advance voting. Whilst the erection of such tents did not explicitly breach electoral laws, the Electoral Committee condemned the practice, arguing that it created a fertile ground for possible violations, such as trying to influence voters or buying votes. To an extent, the concern was alleviated by the fact that the system of e-voting allows voters to replace votes cast over the internet, and to cancel an internet vote by casting a regular vote at the polling station on election day.

9.3 Electoral results

The elections were held on 7 June 2009, with advance voting taking place from 1 to 3 June. Three observations about the context of the 2009 EP elections are in order. First, the elections were genuine mid-term elections, taking place two years and three months after the national parliamentary elections were won by the pro-market Reform Party, which had formed a coalition with the centre-right Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (IRL) and the small Social Democratic Party (SDE). Second, the EP elections took place in the midst of a major economic crisis. Following a decade of high growth, the economy contracted by 15.8 per cent in the first half of 2009, and unemployment reached 14 per cent in the second quarter of 2009, up from 4.6 per cent in June 2008. Aspiring for inclusion in the euro-zone, the government had pushed through massive budget cuts to comply with the Maastricht criteria. Conflicts over the budget cuts culminated with the SDE leaving the three-member governing coalition in May 2009.

Problems with the web-based information system that was supposed to display votes in real time as they were coming in caused a delay in announcing the results on election night. The Centre Party initially appeared to have three mandates, and only with the last results coming in did it become clear that the Social Democrats had won enough votes to secure a mandate, leaving the Centre Party with two mandates.

This confusion, along with the small number of votes that separated the Centre Party from having three mandates, led to repeated requests for the recounting of votes and a close scrutiny of invalid ballots. In response to the request by the Centre Party, votes were recounted for the third time in eight out of 15 counties. The Centre Party also turned to the Estonian Supreme Court to dispute the decision of the Electoral Committee to consider as valid a few hundred ballots that did not have two stamps; according to the Estonian EP Election Act, ballots that have only one stamp are invalid. The Estonian Supreme Court abrogated three decisions of the Electoral Committee and declared 201 ballots to be invalid. Neither this decision nor the vote recount changed the distribution of mandates. Nevertheless, the Centre Party turned to the board of Riigikogu with a request to recall Heiki Sibul, Chairman of the National Electoral Committee, whom the party accused of failing to correctly and lawfully organize the European Parliament elections. This request was not backed by any other major political actor.

Estonia registered the greatest increase in voter turnout compared to the 2004 EP elections amongst all EU countries. Out of 909,628 eligible voters, 399,181 individuals cast their votes, yielding a turnout of 43.9 per cent (National Electoral Committee, 2009). In 2004, only 26.8 per cent of eligible voters had come to the polling booth. Turnout was highest in the capital city Tallinn with 54.1 per cent, the surrounding region, Harju county, with 48.4 per cent, and the north-east of the country, where Russian-speakers form the majority, with 46.1 per cent. Over the internet 58,669 people voted, corresponding to 6.5 per cent of eligible voters and 14.9 per
Internet voting appears to have contributed significantly to the electoral turnout, reaching 45.4 per cent of all advance votes.

The six EP mandates were allocated between four parties and one independent candidate. The main opposition party, the Centre Party, gained the largest share of the vote of 26.1 per cent and secured two seats in the EP. The biggest surprise, however, was the unprecedented success of independent candidate Indrek Tarand, who won 25.8 per cent of the vote, only 1,046 fewer votes than the Centre Party and surpassing all other major and minor parties. Tarand gained the largest share of the vote in all 17 regions, 15 counties and two major cities, except Tallinn and Ida-Viru county, which have a high percentage of Russian speakers.

Such a spectacular performance by an independent candidate is unprecedented on many levels. First, the system used in Estonia in 2009 was closed-list proportional representation (PR), the type of electoral arrangement considered to be least conducive to the electoral strength of independents (Brancati, 2008). Second, to be elected to the European Parliament as an independent candidate is a rare accomplishment. Between 1999 and 2009, only eight individuals entered the EP as independents: five of them came from Ireland, which uses the single transferable vote system, and the two candidates elected from Romania, which used closed-list PR, had close ties to certain political parties. Tarand, in contrast, was a genuinely independent candidate who was not backed by any political party, significant interest group, or civil society organization. Third, Tarand’s triumph is unique in the context of Estonia’s electoral history, standing in sharp contrast to the negligible share of the vote (0.1 per cent) won by independents in the 2007 general election.

Political commentators unanimously attributed Tarand’s victory to widespread anti-party sentiment amongst the electorate. However, a recent study that uses individual-level data from the European Elections Study to analyse the behaviour of Estonian voters suggests an alternative explanation. According to Piret Ehin and Mihkel Solvak (2012), voting for an independent candidate constituted a low-cost strategy for punishing the incumbents in a context where strong socio-political cleavages inhibited vote-switching to the opposition. The study shows that the majority of voters who voted for Tarand in 2009 had supported one of the government parties in the 2007 Riigikogu elections. This interpretation is entirely consistent with the Second-Order Election theory, according to which voters use secondary elections to punish or reward political incumbents.

### Table 22.5 EP election results in Estonia: 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lists</th>
<th>Votes %</th>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eesti Keskerakond</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indrek Tarand (independent candidate)</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eesti Reformierakond</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setiiaalemokraatlik erakond</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erakond Eestimaa Rohelised</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Helme (independent candidate)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eestimaa Rahvalit</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimitri Kleski (independent candidate)</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Turnout** 43.9%


*Note: Table includes parties and independent candidates receiving over 1% of the vote.*
### Table 22.6 List of Estonian MEPs: seventh legislature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>National party</th>
<th>Political group</th>
<th>Professional background</th>
<th>Age in 2009</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Committee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Siiri Oviir</td>
<td>Centre Party</td>
<td>ALDE</td>
<td>MEP since 2004; MP 1992–2004; Minister of Social Affairs in various governments; Member of Tallinn City Council 1996–2002</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Women’s Rights and Gender Equality; Employment and Social Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vilja Savisaar</td>
<td>Centre Party</td>
<td>ALDE</td>
<td>MP 2003–2009, Municipal Politician in Tallinn; Journalist; Secretary General of Ministry of Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Transport and Tourism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indrek Tarand</td>
<td>Independent Greens/EFA</td>
<td>ALDE</td>
<td>Journalist; Secretary General of Ministry of Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Constitutional Affairs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/it/search.html?country=EE.
The two parties of the governing coalition, the Reform Party and the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union, won 15.3 and 12.2 per cent of the vote, respectively, with one mandate each. The Social Democratic Party gained 8.7 per cent of the vote and one seat. The SDP’s dramatic loss of vote share compared to the 2004 elections was expected; in 2004, the party’s success was due to the extraordinary popularity of one candidate, the former Foreign Minister Toomas Hendrik Ilves. The two smaller parties represented in the Riigikogu, the Greens and the People’s Union, remained without a mandate, receiving 2.7 and 2.2 per cent of the vote, respectively.

The six candidates elected to the European Parliament were Edgar Savisaar and Siiri Oviir (Centre Party), Indrek Tarand (independent candidate), Kristiina Ojuland (Reform Party), Tunne-Väldo Kelam (Pro Patria and Res Publica Union), and Ivari Padar (Social Democratic Party). As expected, Savisaar turned down the EP seat, passing it on to his wife, Vilja Savisaar, number three in the Centre Party’s electoral list. Two of the elected members (Oviir and Kelam) had served as MEPs during the EP’s previous term. Padar was also elected MEP in 2004 but he did not take up the seat in the Strasbourg arena.

9.4 Campaign finance

Under the Political Parties Act, the funding of political parties may consist of membership fees, allocations from the state budget, donations by natural persons, political party funds, and loans or credits. All of these sources of funding may be used to finance election campaigns. Independent candidates may also use donations from legal persons. In all cases, anonymous or concealed donations are prohibited. All parties that receive at least 1 per cent of the vote in general elections receive state funding. State funding to parliamentary parties is proportional to the number of seats in the Riigikogu. State subsidies to parties have increased consistently since the mid-1990s (Sikk, 2006), whilst significant restrictions on private financing have been introduced; notably, corporate donations were banned in 2004.

Overall, campaign spending in the 2009 EP elections was much lower than in the general elections in 2007. According to party declarations on campaign spending, the six parliamentary parties spent about 25 million kroons (€1.6 million) on EP elections, compared to 117.4 million kroons (€7.5 million) in Riigikogu elections. The Centre Party ran the most expensive campaign (9.5 million kroons, or about €607,000), whilst the two government parties spent over five million kroons each (€319,000). The Social Democrats spent two million kroons (€128,000), the Greens 1.8 million kroons (€115,000) and the People’s Union 1.6 million kroons (€102,000) (Seaver, 2009). Tarand’s campaign was by far the most cost-effective: his overall election-related spending amounted to a mere 50,000 kroons (about €3200).

10 Theoretical interpretation of Euro-elections

10.1 Second-Order Election theory

The results of EP elections in Estonia seem to corroborate most of the hypotheses associated with the Second-Order Election thesis (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). As predicted, turnout in Euro-elections, especially in 2004, was much lower than in national parliamentary elections. In addition, ruling parties were punished by voters. The leading government partner, the Reform Party, was the main loser, as its vote share dropped from 27.8 per cent in general elections to 15.3 per cent in EP elections. Another government party, the Pro Patria and Res Publica Union, also lost a significant share of the vote. The Social Democrats, a junior government
Estonia

partner that left the coalition shortly before the June 2009 election, suffered smaller losses, winning 8.7 per cent of the vote compared to 10.6 per cent in the general election.

However, the Estonian case deviates from the standard version of the Second-Order Election model in one important respect: the main winners were not opposition parties, large or small, but independent candidates. The main opposition party, Centre Party, repeated its election result from 2007. The smaller opposition parties, Greens, People’s Union, actually lost votes. An impressive 30.4 per cent of the vote went to independent candidates, compared to 0.1 per cent in the 2007 general elections, whilst, in the 2004 EP contest, the independent candidates got 5.7 per cent of the vote. This peculiar pattern of voting behaviour could be explained by the effects of an increasingly polarized party system, where disappointed government voters find it difficult to switch to the opposition (Ehin and Solvak, 2012). Voting for an independent candidate allowed disenchanted government loyalists to punish the government without rewarding the opposition.

10.2 Europe Salience theory

The EP elections in Estonia offer very little empirical support to the alternative Europe Salience model (Hix and Marsh, 2007). There is no clear evidence that voters rewarded candidates with strong positions on Europe. Tarand’s agenda focussed on domestic politics, and he expressed barely any views on European integration. Neither is there evidence of any significant success of Green, anti-European or extreme parties. As newcomers in the Estonian political arena, the Greens had established themselves in 2007, securing six seats in the Rõigikogu. Attracting just 2.7 per cent of the vote in the EP election was a true disappointment. Eurosceptic movements appeared very weak and their campaigns were barely visible. The independent candidates with more extremist or anti-European views, such as Helme and Klenski, won 2.5 per cent and 1.8 per cent of the vote, respectively.

European integration and related issues, however, were clearly salient in 2004. Held one month after the EU’s historic Eastern enlargement, in the wake of a series of high-publicity referenda on EU accession, the 2004 campaign focussed more on European issues and Estonia’s position in Europe than on domestic politics, even if the debate on European matters was sometimes quite primitive (Sikk, 2009). In any case, the Estonian findings chime well with the results of comparative studies that have questioned the ability of the Second-Order Election model to explain the first EP contests in the post-Communist Member States (Koepke and Ringe, 2006; Hix and Marsh, 2007).

In a comparative perspective, Estonia’s experience with EP elections lends considerable support to the familiar Second-Order Election model, whilst also suggesting that European issues can be central to EP campaigns when integration is politicized and public opinion divided. The dynamics of public and party-based Euroscepticism in Estonia challenges the conventional understanding that in forming positions on European integration, voters pick up cues from the parties. In Estonia, high levels of popular Euroscepticism preceded any significant party-based Euroscepticism. Parties began to cater to Eurosceptic voters in 2004, after a positive vote on the accession referendum had been secured and missed the mark because the public mood had already changed.

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